

# RESEARCHING CITIES

## ZMVM (Zona Metropolitana del Valle de México)/VMMZ (Valley of Mexico Metropolitan Zone)

Fernando Romero

ZMVM (Zona Metropolitana del Valle de México) is a data recollection project that explores the transformation of the critical conditions that define urban life in Mexico City (population, size, economy, insecurity, pollution, water, infrastructure, housing, transport, relations, informal conditions, young population, education, power and politics, as well as making some prospectives towards the next century).

The analysis is more general than specific, and it constitutes the first step towards a more specific analysis, projects, proposals and solutions that will continue to deal with Mexico City as a whole and in parts. Its purpose is to demonstrate the need for an analysis phase that is not divorced from the solutions, and as a critic to recent projects done that do not consider the city's complex conditions.

Currently under final process and review on design, it is a project started in January 1999 by LCM (Laboratorio de la Ciudad de México, an architecture and investigation office which members all under 30 years come from different professional backgrounds), with the final purpose of presenting it as a book which will be published next year by Mexico's Council for the Culture and Arts. Parallel to the investigation, a group of 10 young artists were invited to participate in the project creating work specifically for each chapter of the book, and which in a way would provide for an analogous and complementary discourse.

Please see our website [www.storefrontnews.org](http://www.storefrontnews.org) for a link to the online presentation of this project.

## SINGAPORE

### Hom-e-scapes

### Housing 12 Stories

Eunice Seng

"Prior to 1965, Singapore as a political entity did not exist conceptually, ... Singapore as an independent nation state was first and foremost a political reality hoisted on a group of politicians under conditions beyond the latter's control. Once this was a fait accompli, it was necessary to construct a 'nation' tabula rasa."

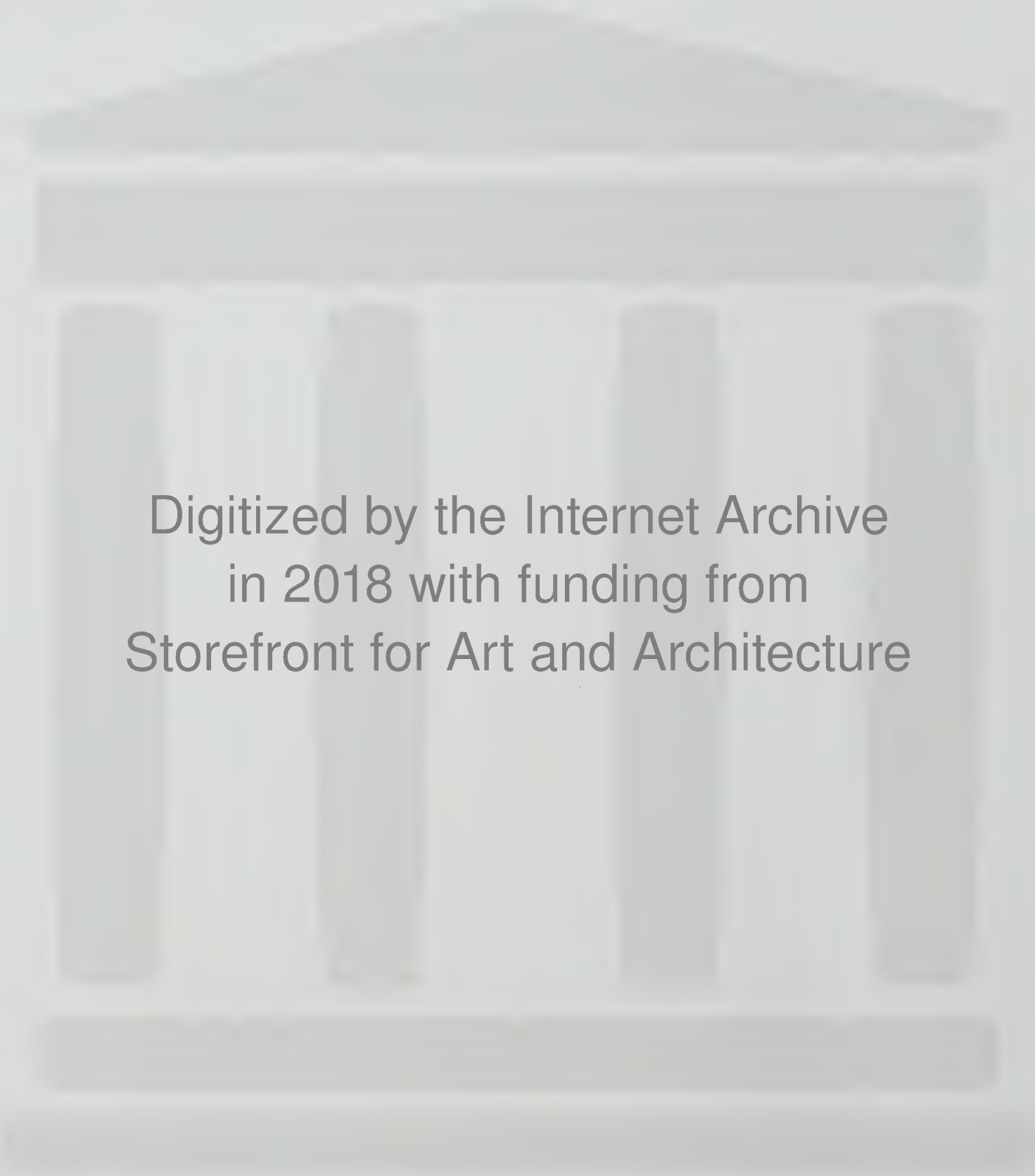
Singapore's only resources are physical - its land, its population, its geographical position - yet along with these are social attachments and implications which manifest themselves at unprecedented scales.

Nikos Papastergiadis keenly observes that "the migrant's relationship to the past is at best metaphorical than a rigid translation." The attempt to bring near what is distant is not an example of treating space as the tabula rasa upon which predetermined desires or retroactive nostalgia are fulfilled, but is an exercise in forging a sense of continuity and meaning out of discontinuous fragments. The dissonance produced by the confrontation with 'new' horizons and the repetition of 'old' compulsions is neither negligible, nor reducible to the inherent tendencies within the original, but are crucial to the 'catalytic' dynamism of modernity'.

Singapore, "[l]ike the Dutch, who also fabricated their country," did not construct itself from scratch. At first glance, one is bought over by Rem Koolhaas' careful photographic maneuver of aerial views presenting acres of red bulldozed earth foregrounding stark white modernist housing blocks: "the razed plane as the basis for a genuinely new beginning." But what is presented as a genuinely new beginning, is a scriptwriter's visual trick, an intentional obliteration of an obvious. This is not a tabula rasa, but a palimpsest; a physical lull in a capitalist space.

But the abstract space of capitalism cannot contain the multiplicities in lived reality, which constantly spills, slips, misinterpret and threaten its very establishment. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre maintains that, "[s]pace is social; it involves assigning more or less appropriated places to the social relations of reproduction, namely the biophysiological relations between the sexes, the ages, the specified organization of the family, and to the relations of production, namely, the division of labor and its organization." The past has left its marks, its inscriptions, albeit a highly individualized one, but space is always a present space, a current totality, with its links and connections to action. One cannot separate the production from the product.

Space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations, but it also is producing and produced by social relations. Social space is explained by neither nature (the climate and the topology), history, nor "culture". It is precisely at this point that my thesis locates itself, where lateral observatory platforms are offered, beyond those of the occidental critic.



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2018 with funding from  
Storefront for Art and Architecture

[https://archive.org/details/200004\\_researchi00clau](https://archive.org/details/200004_researchi00clau)



Architecture is involved in the act of inhabitation, construction and interpretation of space. It questions and simultaneously posits itself within the question (subjection to inquiry). The physical manifestation of this question (act) is the public acknowledgement of its "present" and "presentness".

Capitalism has produced an abstract space that is a reflection of the world of business on both national and international levels, as well as the power of money and the "politique" of the state. In this space - the cradle of accumulation, the place of richness, the subject of history, the center of historical space - in other words, the city, has exploded. According to Lefebvre, capitalist space functions as a means of production, an object of consumption, a political instrument and the intervention of class struggle. In Singapore, where 90% of the population now lives in public housing, the HDB (Housing Development Board) flat offers itself as a notable subject of study.

It all began with the movie - 12 Storeys, by Eric Khoo. A low-key production featuring the lives of four families in a 24-hour cycle, the movie presented inhabitants in a public housing block through the eyes of a voyeur - the suicide boy (key character of the movie); the cockroach (the unwanted pest); the director (the roving eye behind the camera). Using 12 Storeys as a vehicle and template for spatial and character analyses, the project proposes an alternative housing strategy in which the accumulation of every individual's crafting of his/her own home-space creates temporal and mutable homescapes. This celebration of the autonomy of the singular is a reaction towards the large-scale urbanistic planning of housing policies in Singapore.

I began by following the protagonists - head of each of the four families - through every frame and scene in which each appeared, usually trudging through the space - space in the blocks. Bedrooms, bathrooms, doors, windows, corridors, lifts, gardens, parks, playgrounds, ... unfold, collapse and interweave. Film space threads delicately through real space.

### **Twelve Storeys - Characters**

**Astro Boy** - a nickname I gave him because of his T-shirt which featured the little Japanese superhero - a disillusioned individual who committed suicide by jumping from the 12th story in the beginning of the film. It was he, who crossed through the walls and windows to reveal the daily enactments of the others.

**San San** - a name constantly spitted out by her foster mother when the latter was still alive - an obese woman who went through the routine of cleaning, washing, marketing and food preparation and never seemed to have a life outside of the block and its vicinity. The old lady's vicious accusations and lamentations of her obesity and uselessness played incessantly in her mind. It was she, who first contemplated suicide, but dared not execute the deed.

**Ah Gu** - a crude and uneducated hawker who responded mainly to his manly needs - bought a wife from China but not her heart. In exchange for the increased material comfort, she exchanged sex (once fortnightly) for cash and "freedom". He wanted a baby to carry on the family name. She cannot wait to leave him soon enough.

**Teacher** - everyone knew him by that name - a conservative public servant who took it upon himself to rid the neighborhood and society of pests. He lived a double-life - one outside, one within and in his bathroom - where the latter is suppressed and carefully reined. When both lives intersect and the latter took over, the ghosts of the pests escaped through him...

### **Space-time analysis**

Preliminary analyses involve following the characters as they experience the block, their personal domain, the shared spaces as well as the interstitial spaces.

#### **Astro Boy**

Objects: cigarettes, liquor, comic books + toys, bed

Spaces: bedroom, apartment, corridor, stairs, elevator

He has been up all night, smoking and drinking. And thinking, about his empty life. He throws up blood. He takes another drink, lies back in his bed, then leaves his apartment. He rides the elevator, follows a woman to the 12th story and sees her try to commit suicide. Taking that as a cue, he walks to the end of the corridor, takes a look down, and jumps...

#### **San San**

Objects: food, shopping basket, parcel, chair, bed

Spaces: coffee shop, playground, elevator, corridor, stairs, living room, kitchen, bedroom



She drags her feet as she walks, stopping only to see a man going through his usual morning exercise routine at the playground. She takes the elevator to the 12th story and attempts to commit suicide. She changes her mind, picks up her shopping bag and goes home. She prepares her meal and cleans the house, but the aggressive nagging of her deceased mother still rings in her head. It is as if the old lady is still alive. At night, she cries herself to sleep...

### **Teacher**

Objects: clock, bed, door to bedroom, television, liquor, desk, couch, water closet, swing, trash bin

Spaces: bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom, corridor, playground, park He looks into his siblings' room.

It is way past midnight. His younger sister is still not home. He goes back to bed. He wakes up for a morning jog and goes through his daily exercise routine. On his way back, he picks up litter from the floor - a true supporter of the "don't litter" campaign. He finds his sister still in bed. He interrogates her during breakfast. She shrugs and changes the subject. His younger brother finds a condom in her sister's purse. He confiscates it and plays with it in the bathroom. Distrusting, he interrogates her sister again at night and a violent argument ensues. Utterly disappointed with his sister's immoral behavior (she has had sex since she was fourteen), he drinks to oblivion.

### **Ah Gu**

Objects: bed, statue of goddess of mercy, cell phone, closet, wife's secret drawer

Spaces: bedroom, living room, coffee shop, playground

He watches his wife leave the apartment, dressed to the nines. He questions her but is rebuffed. Defeated, he secretly checks the messages on her cell. There were messages from her lover. He is outraged and confronts her when she returned. She threatens to leave him. He begs her to stay. He promises to give her all his earnings. It is a trade-off. He, an aging childless boorish hawker in his forties, gets a beautiful bride from China. She, a young woman longing for greater economic freedom out of her own country, regardless of the costs. At night, she cries herself to sleep.

### **Individual housing strategies / strains**

"90% of people in Singapore live in allocated public housing." The idiosyncrasies of everyday living and the conflation of personal space with shared common spaces lead to the implantation of a housing strain back into the 12 story block (the original block in contention - a generic housing type in Singapore during its earlier stages the public housing scheme in the sixties).

### **A social experiment**

With the basic assumption that an individual desires the freedom to live out his own lifestyle and habits, the block is gutted clean of its interiors and partitions. The site is the structure and its elevator and stair cores. A blank slate for one to build upon.

### **Objectives**

To illustrate and interrogate alternatives to allocated mass housing.

### **Assumptions**

Due to the structural integrity of the existing post and beam concrete frame system, it is economical to retain the structural frame and circulation cores of the block. The illustration of one strain is able to postulate the juxtaposition of multiplicities and inhabitations.

### **Subjects**

The individual (in 3 categories):

Main movie character (movie / director's interpretation of existing socio-economic conditions)

Secondary movie character (movie's introduction of socio-economic states of interdependency)

Non-fiction character (the man on the street / any member of the public)

### **Objects/Spaces**

Apartment (Bedroom, Bathroom, Living Room, Kitchen, Storeroom, Closet), Corridor, Elevator, Stairs, Coffee shop, Car park, Playground, Park.

While only one strain is interrogated in depth (Astro Boy - Singapore Girl - Cleaner), color annotations illustrated the possibilities of multiple strains - to a point at which the entire block is filled and inhabitations spill over.

### **Inhabitations : a diagram**

Red

Pioneer inhabitants: In this case, the main movie characters - Astro Boy, San San, Teacher, Ah Gu.





Mustard

Inhabitants with less impact on their surroundings. In this case, the secondary movie characters - Singapore Girl, Music Boy, Coffee-shopkeeper, Middle-aged Bachelor.

Purple

Any other potential inhabitants who is drawn to the block through various economic, social and personal reasons.

Green

Vegetation / Park / Breathing spaces.

### **Strain One**

#### **Character 1**

Astro boy returns to the block acting as a catalyst. The way he lives and the spaces he needs affect his adjacent neighbor and anyone else who crosses his path. As a result, a secondary strain occur.

#### **Character 2**

The character of the Singapore Girl (a voiceless secondary character in 12 Storey) is introduced into this experiment at this stage. From the movie, she is postulated to be living adjacent to Astro boy, based on potential common amenities required by singles in their mid-twenties and their states of existential angst.

#### **Character 3**

The third strain foresees another character outside of the constraints of the movie. It could be anyone. In this case, a cleaner is thrown into the melting pot. His presence pervades the block as he has access to all the shared spaces in the block. Yet, his own domain is limited to a small janitor room in which he shares with others like him. The space he carves for himself is seen as parasitic to the spaces of the other inhabitants of the block.

### **An-other movie**

Excerpt

Astro Boy wakes up from his bed. He throws up in the bathroom. He catches his eye on his collection of comic character toys and magazines. He returns to bed. He walks down the corridor... His physical domain is linear. Almost by default, he now occupies the corridor. When he is not in his apartment, his space is the corridor. Everything collapses onto the sides - the bed into the wall, the bathroom into the floor, the shelves tucked neatly in between a column bay.

Singapore Girl returns home from work. She drops her suitcase and flops down onto her bed. A nice long soak in the tub follows... Her space alternates between visibility and opacity. When she is at home, she is completely enclosed, as the ground moves up or opens up to enfold. When she leaves, the entire space is visually penetrable (light-activated translucent wall-shelves/frames), like her open suitcase, but empty. She brings her most precious belongings with her. She trusts no one...

Cleaner goes there to keep his tools and to take a breather. Then he leaves for another floor or downstairs to the coffee shop for a drink. He clings to the underside of the corridor, usually assumed as an interstitial space. He is migratory and relies on a niche that keeps him safely out of sight most of the time. His role is to remain inconspicuous. His space is usually the flip-side of someone else'...

### **BOMBAY**

#### **Urban Strategies: A 6 th Layer for Bombay/Mumbai**

Claudia Dias

The character of the new Asian city today seems to be the city of 'no history'. Buildings older than 30 years are hard to find. They are either changed beyond recognition, replaced by new constructions or the site was only recently reclaimed. 'New Towns' built for up to 2 million inhabitants have to face the fact of 'Zero-Context', or, simply become the New Context. I chose Bombay for a case study to follow the direct reactions on the fast increasing density, where within the last 10 years New Bombay was planned and developed as a 'mirror city' on the mainland for 2 million inhabitants. Looking at Bombay, another aspect came up. Today both, New Town and Old City, don't represent any longer the succession of different political systems, but a coexistence of different social and functional planes or, 'horizons of events'. The physical reaction on the increasing density of the Island of Bombay happens in layers, when the historically protected city becomes the landscape for the next developments - on top or in between this





landscape. Today, Bombay is based on the phenomenon of flux and on different interacting forms of movement. When I mapped down 5 different circulation systems I discovered 5 different organized cities within one. My project imagines a 6th layer of movement, which is based on observations of periodical changes, the local scale of organization and on particular social time-use construction.

This project was conceived as my thesis work at the Berlage Institute Amsterdam in 1996, advised by Rem Koolhaas and Roul Bunschoten, with the contributions of Irene Crulli, Antonella Vitale, Jan-Richard Kikkert, Holger Gladys, Sven Groten and Keisuke Tamura.

## **BERLIN**

### **Architecture in Pain**

Dirk Hebel

"With the political reunification of the two Germanys on 3 October 1990 and its designation as the capital Berlin (3.5 million inhabitants) has once again become an European metropolis." (Art+Com, Berlin, 1996)

#### **The East-Berlin Disease**

The impassioned debates about its future have been dominated by the question of how architectural interventions in the existing city should relate to Berlin's emotionally charged history. During the first years of the 1990s, and in many of the competitions relating to the rebuilding of the city, conceptions of Berlin as an international city have clashed with regionalist and provincialist perspectives rooted firmly in the glorious past. In order to focus the efforts for a rebuilding of the city, Peter Strieder, the Senator for Building in Berlin, initiated a new master plan for the inner city of the reunified Berlin. In 1996, the so-called Planwerk was introduced to the public and since then has generated one of the most interesting architectural debates in post-war Germany.

The Planwerk seems stuck to the credo propagated by the Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA 1984-1996): a dialogue between the present and the historical context based on the architectural type of the Berliner Blockrand. Its most important task was seen as a reformulation of Berlin's identity. It soon became clear, however, that this new identity would be based on the identity of West Berlin.

Typical East German developments, such as the Plattenbausiedlungen in which almost 50% of the East Berlin population lives were not seen as identity-giving structures. In most areas, the plan suggests that they be demolished or masked. These developments are mostly seen as sick spaces in the city fabric, reminders of Communist past. A question still remains, however: how can the Senate distinguish between sick and healthy spaces?

This thesis proposes a new definition of the healthy organism. Rather than the modernist prescriptive and presumptive definition, perhaps "health" can be viewed as a condition in which the body recognizes its capacity for constant and adaptive change. Here, the organism accepts disruptions in its being and measures its health in terms of its ability to overcome organic crises and find other temporary orders.

If the ideas of hygiene and efficiency helped to define "modern space", how would a reversed definition of health (the organism which learns to live with its diseases) define space today? This thesis takes on the Planwerk Berlin and proposes an alternative treatment by building into it a redefined architectural structure.

The particular site, seen as a probe, is located east of the Alexanderplatz on the northern part of the Karl-Marx-Allee. The investigation of this site and the existing structural and infrastructural systems lead to a new prognostic urban plan which opposes the anachronistic image of a pre-war Berlin, which the Planwerk suggests for the site. This is accomplished through a diagnosis of the symptoms and three alternative treatments.

#### **symptom 1**

**urban monoto-phobia** The obvious monotony on the site of the Karl-Marx-Allee is formed by the rectangular layout of the buildings and the sameness of the facades facing the empty spaces between. The prefabricated elements of the Plattenbauten were assembled on site. Cranes on tracks with a 30m range were used to construct the buildings. The layout is therefore not only an artistic but also a practical solution. Tracing the rectangular range areas around the existing structures, gaps or excess spaces can be found. Filling those spaces, the monotony could be further increased and maybe overcome.

#### **treatment 1**

**Urban monoto-phobia**, the fear of being monotonous, is to be treated by increasing the monotony on the



This treatment follows the definition, that a healthy body is not the one which overcomes the disease, but learns how to live with it. Looking at the construction grid of the site at the Karl-Marx-Allee, leftover space can be spotted. These spots embody the possibility for further development, which is almost stored in the DNA of the site. Rather than forcing the existing into the conservative cliché of the historical Berlin axes, inherent potentials are to be activated.

### **symptom 2**

**infrastructural disorder** The construction of the Plattenbauten embodied from the very beginning an implicit question: how to deal with the necessary gaps and joints in the prefabricated system? No sufficient material was available and the production methods were not tested long enough. Only a few years after their construction, a lot of the Plattenbauten had already been renovated. Most of all facade-, bathroom- and construction-gaps showed heavy damage. Looking at these three joint systems, how can new spaces be inserted to take on the function of these gaps but introduce alternative formal and programmatic solutions?

### **treatment 2**

The pathology of the gap is to be treated by increasing the amount and the surface area of the gaps and Water, air and light were long seen as the enemy of the Plattenbauten. By investigating the different joint systems and looking at their characteristics, a new form of gap is to be introduced to the building. It will take on the three elements and creates a path for them through the apartment. This bleeding gap takes on the function of the bathroom on one side and the programmatic informed division to the kitchen on the other. This strategy also attacks the facades. Facing south and west, the bleeding gaps deform the existing with the gap structure that holds on from inside. The north and east facades function as a breathing mechanism, which can be controlled by each individual tenant.

### **symptom 3**

**site autism/agoraphobia** The so-called "isolation" of the site is the result of a formal and also ideological difference caused by the shift from a historical to a modern, communist urban planning. The aim of the city planners was not to create a single homogenous fabric in East-Berlin, but to develop a heterogeneous patchwork of independent city islands. The site on the Karl-Marx-Allee can be seen as one of those islands. The problem, however, is the treatment of the program, which is as monotonous as the prefabricated facade. How can new and more differentiated programs be inserted on an urban as well as an individual level?

### **treatment 3**

Agoraphobia, the fear of being outside, is to be treated by increasing the isolation factors on the site. One characteristic of the monotony on the site is the isolation of the green areas, which seem to be single cells but have no overall connection. These green areas are almost avoided because they lack any kind of acquisition by the tenants. The greens adjacent to the buildings will be lifted and deformed. They create an urban gap underneath, which is to be filled with a new program (entertainment, shopping, restaurants, etc.) on top they serve as a communal recreation area, which belongs to each individual structure but also connects the flying greens on a visual level above the urban ground.

Berlin 2000 thesis Dirk Hebel, Princeton University, February 2000, Advisor: Laura Kurgan

About Cities  
Some Cities  
Looking at Cities  
Inserts  
More of the Same  
The inbetween  
Five projects for the City  
The new in the Old

Notes to glean from:





This exhibition presents methods of researching, recording and representing the contemporary city as a means to project the future development and uses of urban space. In studies of urban areas around the world, data, maps, plans and census are collected as a document that reflects the current existence of the city--its diverse and conflicting interests, and historically changing needs, desires and resources. These research initiatives anticipate the inevitable growth and the indeterminate use that metropolitan areas will bear by recording the current condition--representing actual use in contrast to intended and projected use. Not all of the work in this exhibition presents a specific project or a defined solution, but each inquiry leads to new methods and practices of using and projecting uses for the city.

The majority of the world's population lives in cities and in the next century we will witness unprecedented growth. As cities densify and grow in indeterminate ways, metropolitan life could be categorized by the search for and creation of space. The projects presented here investigate the existing fabric of five major metropolitan cities exposing the possibilities for current and future use. From Fernando Romero's analysis of Mexico City in the Rome to Stalker's expeditions through the peripheral spaces of Rome, these projects investigate contemporary urban phenomena and present us with the infinite possibilities for current and future use latent in their findings. Each inquiry leads to new methods and practices of using and projecting uses for the city.

The function and activities of cities are driven by diverse and conflicting interests, changing needs, resources and desires: from the economy, new technology, land use, and infrastructure to housing. The forces that shape urban systems range in scale and from the economy, the impact of technology, land use, to housing and transportation needs, range in scale and contribute to the complexity of the city.

Cities are driven by diverse and conflicting interests, needs, resources and desires. As cities world wide grow at unprecedented rates, and urban systems develop in indeterminate ways, one aspect of metropolitan life could be categorized by the search for and creation of space. The projects represented Researching Cities present various methods of researching, recording and representing the contemporary city as a means to understand the way the it functions and to anticipate its future development. From Fernando Romero's analysis of Mexico City in the Rome to Stalker's expeditions through the peripheral spaces of Rome, these projects investigate contemporary urban phenomena and present us with the infinite possibilities for current and future use latent in their findings. Each inquiry leads to new methods and practices of using and projecting uses for the city.

Cities are driven by diverse and conflicting interests, needs, and desires. The projects in this exhibition present methods of researching the contemporary city as a means to understand the way it functions and to anticipate its future development.

